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# Forging Theatre and Community: Challenges and Strategies for Serving Two Missions

*Danny L. Balfour and Ramya Ramanath<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Overture**

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been characterized as the era of the “outsourced brain” (Brooks, 2007;) and “American unreason” (Jacoby, 2009), with human contact and communication routinely mediated and compromised by a myriad of electronic devices. Vanderburg (2005:82) describes this recent development in the human condition as follows:

Today technology is creating a new life-milieu that includes, but is not limited to, the modern city and the web of technological means used in virtually every daily-life-activity, to the point that they interpose themselves between us and others, between us and much of what happens in our society and the world, and between us and nature. It is largely via these technological means that we experience and participate in our world.

As personal computers, the Internet, cell phones, video games, and i-pods merge into a seamless source of personalized virtual reality, how can individuals be enticed to emerge from their electronic silos and actually engage others in meaningful discourse as members of a community with common interests and problems? One organizational response to this challenge is the activities of community-based organizations. Such organizations are widely recognized for their ability to promote and facilitate creative face-to-face human interactions that serve as a counterweight to the forces of individuation and declining trust in public institutions, while playing a niche role in the process of building and sustaining community solidarity (Kramer, 1981; Coleman, 1990; Putnam et al, 1993).

This study provides an in-depth examination of one organization that strives to build community through face-to-face interaction: Live Arts community theatre in Charlottesville, Virginia. Founded in 1990 by a small group of artists dedicated to producing theatre that are “modern, rigorous, and risky,” the organization seeks to be both a product of its community and a process for creating it. This unique mission aims to “create extraordinary work with

ordinary people” and is committed to “outreach, education, and new works as tools for *creating both art and community*” (Live Arts, 2004, italics added).

The dual mission of promoting community involvement and achieving excellence in theatre productions is a source of creative tension for the organization, as it requires balancing two seemingly contradictory impulses. Critics have noted that by embracing professionalism, “nonprofit organizations destroy community rather than building it up” (Salamon, 2002, p. 20). These tensions are magnified (or perhaps manifested) by recent rapid growth and change in the organization, from operating with a small budget and limited facilities to a nearly \$1 million dollar budget, an annual audience of 20,000, critical acclaim, a new facility, and a volunteer base of over 500.

The setting of a community-based nonprofit organization such as Live Arts provides a rich and revelatory platform to examine what we believe to be critical concerns of the nonprofit sector at large. An organization’s success creates pressures upon leadership to not merely fulfill its social mission but to function, “...as aggressive entrepreneurs leading outward-oriented enterprises able to attract paying customers, while retaining the allegiance of socially committed donors and boards, all of this in a context of growing public scrutiny and mistrust” (Salamon, 2002, p. 22). We articulate these concerns to comprise the following research question that is central to the study:

*How does a community theatre manage growth, success, and the demand for high standards in performance and organization, without compromising its dedication to cutting edge productions, building community, and reliance on volunteers?*

In particular, we examine how Live Arts seeks to preserve and balance its mission of achieving artistic excellence that challenges and engages the community, the need for financial sustainability, and more efficient production and management systems. How can these multiple goals be managed simultaneously, particularly as critics argue that increasing professionalization of nonprofit work is likely to rob organizations of much of the community driven components of their missions?

### **Act One - Literature Review: Understanding Nonprofit Community Theatres**

American theatre consists of a wide repertoire of theatres from commercial theatre organizations such as Broadway production companies and dinner theatres, to professional nonprofit theatres, amateur nonprofit theatre companies, and community-based theatres. This project focuses on what are classified as nonprofit professional theatres registered as public charities. However, a clear cut definition is a nearly impossible endeavor because “any profile of nonprofit professional theater”, as Wyszomirski (2001, p. 208) rightly states, “...is likely to blur the distinctions between nonprofit and commercial theatres as well as between professional and amateur productions.” This blurring is both the result of substantial

movement of actors and theatre personnel between the sectors and a movement of audience amongst them.

Some attempts at definitions are worth highlighting: Geer (2008) defines a community-based theatre as a "...theater *of, by, and for* a particular group. It is Outward Bound for towns. Celebratory and critical, it is controlled by the consensus of two expert groups — artists and community members" (Geer, 2008). Cohen-Cruz (2005, p. 2) identifies community performance as, "collaboration between an artist or ensemble and a 'community' in that the latter is a primary source of the text, possibly of performers as well, and definitely a goodly portion of the audience." Cohen-Cruz clarifies stating that despite the usage of highly similar terms, *community-based* performance is not to be confused with community theater. She draws the distinction thus (Cohen-Cruz, 2005): "...in contrast to *community-based* performance, community theater is enacted by people who neither generate the material, shape it, work with professional guidance, nor apply it beyond an entertainment frame. There need not be [in community theater] any particular resonance between the play and that place and those people, and there is rarely a goal beyond the simple pleasure of 'Let's put on a play'" (p. 7). She identifies collective context, reciprocity, hyphenation, process and an active culture as being key characteristics of a *community-based* production.

Given this distinction, we define, the modern U.S. nonprofit community theatre broadly and thinly on the basis of its legal identity as an independently incorporated theater recognized by the federal government as tax-exempt charitable entity under section 501c3 of the Internal Revenue Code. Professional nonprofit theatres while recognized as 501c3s, may or may not share the characteristics of a *community-based* theatre as described by Geer (1993) and Cohen-Cruz (2005) above. This, indeed, accounts for one of the central contradictions facing professional nonprofit community theatre; an aspect that will receive attention in the review of literature that follows.

In reviewing literature pertinent to the somewhat muddled world of nonprofit community theatres, we begin by briefly examining the history of the theatre movement in the North American context and then move to discussing some of the critical issues faced by the nonprofit theatre community. In doing so, we uncover that, quite like other parts of the arts and culture subsector, nonprofit professional theatres are shrouded with several key contradictions including the nature of commitment of a nonprofit professional theatre to "art":

Is its pursuit of artistic "excellence" too elitist, focused on the needs and preferences of artists and a narrow audience?

How should nonprofit theatres reconcile the need to create art with a fundamental commitment to process and inclusion?

How can nonprofit theatres stay bold and adventurous while also confirming to the ever-present need to demonstrate commercial success to their trustees and supporters?

We begin by examining the history of the theatre movement for it is in its evolution that we uncover some of these key dilemmas.

Community theatre, also called “art theatre, “amateur theatre,” “grassroots theatre,” “group theatre,” “tributary theatre” or even “little theatre,” is one among many forms of theatre. Theatre in America includes professional nonprofit theatre companies, commercial theatre organizations and nonprofit community theatres. Commercial theatre companies range from Broadway production troupes to touring roués. There is a large contingent of nonprofit community theatres – the type of theatre that we are most concerned with in this report. Historically, the roots of American, community-based theater is traced to Native American forms that are rooted in the expression and preservation of collective identity. However, most modern accounts of the origin of American community theatre date to the latter half of the nineteenth century. Inspired in large part by the European Art Theatre movement, “little theatres” brought about revolutionary changes in technique, playwriting and acting. Gradually, these “little theatres” sprouted in states such as Illinois and Wisconsin, which then birthed their own permanent resident theatrical troupes. They produced native local drama and the term “little” denoted the size of the performance halls where many such plays were staged. By 1870, “the country had about fifty permanent resident theatrical troupes, as well as a touring system which brought road shows to town and cities across the land” (Cohen, 2001, p. 41). The growth of the countrywide road system spurred further growth of touring companies to an extent that by 1886, the country boasted of nearly 280 such performers traveling the length and breadth of the country.

But the community-theatre movement did not take off until the turn of the century when, with the advent of movies, the small-town professional playhouses either closed due to the competition from this new art form or were converted to movie-houses. The movement grew in the early part of the twentieth century with over 2,000 registered with the Drama League of America. These groups were lauded as cradles of creative talent,, of “special thrill” (MacGowan, 1929), and as a response to the desire of “American people for a non-merchandized, personal theatre” (Brown, 1939 as cited in Cohen, 2001, p. 42).

According to the American Association of Community Theatre (AACT), that represents and serves amateur, nonprofit theatre companies, “Community theatres involve more participants, present more performances of more productions and play to more people than any performing art in the country. We are critical to the cultural life of the communities of which we are a part.” Percy MacKaye (1909), among the early prophets of American theatre, dreamed of theatre “as a national force” that had hitherto never been associated with democratic ideals such as that of citizenship, law, industry, statecraft or patriotism. He elevated theatre as being “particularly fitted for such association” (Mackaye, 1909, p. 11). Kufinec (2003) contrasts professional and academic theatre from community-based productions when she points out that, community-based productions unlike their “deadly” counterparts:

...reinspire my faith in theater’s ability to directly engage and reflect its audience, by integrating local history, concerns, stories, traditions and/or performers. At the same

time, the work raises deeply provocative questions about ethical representation and about how individuals and groups negotiate their identity. (p. 1)

Most accounts of the professional nonprofit theatre are seamlessly presented alongside a history of community-based theatre. Kuftinec (2003, pp. 32-33) notes that following 1915-1917, several young men were drafted for the First World War causing many “little” theatres to be dissolved. Some that were financially vulnerable chose to institutionalize their organization and in the process, lost the sense of “community” that Kuftinec associates with community-based productions. These theatres professionalized by hiring personnel from the “outside”. Theatres that began to hire “professionals” from the outside started to mimic Broadway; a process that steered many little theatres away from the local development of playwrights. The regionalization, professionalization and even the urbanization of theatre groups (from rural theatres to those located in major metropolitan areas) was looked upon by some as a positive development.

The 1930s through the 1960s and 1970s saw the growth of theatre groups around specific group identities (and hence the name “group theatre”) such as those comprising workers (in the early 1930s) and in due course (in the 1960s and 1970s), African American, lesbian, queer, disabled, Latino/a, Asian American among numerous others. The creation of such groups was, of course, informed by social movements of the time. Kuftinec (2003, p. 37) refers to the formation of such group-based theatre as a paradox for “in the quest for group identity, performance is seen as both a manifestation and formation of culture. Identity then is not pre-formed but performed, essential but not essentialist.” It is from these, Kuftinec (2003, p. 37) continues, that “community-based” theatre emerged and is best distinguished from “group theatre” as “less-grounded in assimilated unity, socialism, or identity politics and more in strategic bridge building.”

Community-based theatre strives to build coalitions and in the process continually works to produce art in an environment rife with tensions between associations and distinctiveness, bridge building and boundary construction, the predictable and creative, planned and spontaneous leadership, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, tolerance and judgment, volunteerism and professionalism, and between inclusion and exclusion. These tensions characterize community-based theatre as much or more as they do professional nonprofit theatre. This will be evident as we trace the history of Live Arts and the many conundrums that drive its work in theatre production.

Before exploring some of these conundrums, we conclude the review of literature with a few facts about professional nonprofit theatre groups. The best source of information on professional nonprofit theatres is the Theatre Communications Group (TCG, 2009), a leading membership organization for professional not-for-profit theatres in the United States. TCG has more than 400 theatre members in 47 states, 17,000 individual members, and represents a wide array of institutional sizes and structures. Thirty-six percent of members have budgets under \$500,000; 21% in the \$500,000-1 million range; 25% in the \$1-3 million range; 6% in the \$3-5 million range; 8% in the \$5-10 million range; and 4% have budgets in the \$10 million or more range. According to its *Theatre Facts 2008*, professional not-for-profit

theatres produced an estimated 202,000 performances in 2008, employed nearly 131,000 paid personnel in artistic, technical and administrative positions, and an attendance of 32 million people. The American Association of Community Theatre (AACT), in contrast, serves amateur nonprofit theatre companies and enlists 7,000 theatres across the U.S. and its territories as well as theatre companies with the armed forces overseas. It boasts of nearly a million volunteers and a combined annual budget of over \$60 million with 45,000 productions per year and more than 375,000 performances garnering a total audience of 7.5 million people.

Despite the fact that community and nonprofit theatres are the largest producers of theatre in the United States and “involve more participants, present more performances of more productions and play to more people than any performing art in the country” (AACT, 2008), there is only a handful of research on the conundrums and pleasures that plague nonprofit community theatre productions. Our research addresses these gaps in the literature and in doing so suggests what we believe to be the next likely steps that Live Arts may utilize to address some of the key tensions.

### **Methodology**

To answer our research question, we conducted a single case study analysis. The primary unit of analysis is the chosen community-based nonprofit organization namely, Live Arts. We focused on critical incidents in Live Arts’ history, particularly as it relates to managing growth and change. These incidents are the second, or nested, unit of analysis. Each incident is “instrumental” to understanding how the leadership at Live Arts managed the pressures of retaining its social mission while also developing a professional response to the demands of theatre production (Stake, 1995). Each of the critical incidents, spread over a lifetime of the nonprofit, was selected using multiple sources of evidence. Detailed examination of organizational archives, participant observation of theatre productions, and in-depth conversations with NPO leaders, board and staff, and with community volunteers, focused our attention on key events. The choice of these events was confirmed and corroborated during the duration of our data collection efforts in Charlottesville, Virginia. We made three visits to Live Arts to study the organization, beginning with an initial round of interviews and observations. After an analysis of these first interviews, we followed up and re-interviewed subjects and additional subjects in order to build a “thick” description of the organization and its role in the community.

## **Act Two: Organizational History/Background**

### **Founding**

Like most community nonprofits and theatres, the story of Live Arts is closely tied to the community in which it performs, Charlottesville, Virginia. A small (pop. 40,427), historic, and vibrant city in north central Virginia, home to Monticello and the University of Virginia, Charlottesville embodies many of the best, and most problematic, aspects of a progressive city in the southeast United States. In 2004 it was rated the best place to live in the USA and is

known as one of America's most educated cities, making it fertile ground for the arts. Despite its obvious attractions, Charlottesville still lives with the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, with wide income and class disparities.

In the 1980s, along with much of the rest of the country, Charlottesville struggled economically, and its downtown area, which features a large walking mall, declined precipitously leaving many boarded up storefronts. It was in this context that Live Arts was born in 1990 as the brainchild of an ensemble of actors and theatre enthusiasts who sought a platform for their craft that did not have to be "family friendly," where they could perform cutting-edge theatre in downtown Charlottesville. After producing Sam Shepard's "Lie of the Mind," they asked themselves,

Might it be possible to have a theatre space in Charlottesville, preferable downtown, that would provide a place to do high quality, alternative performances, a place where the performers would have a significant amount of control over how the space was run (Parent, 2005)?

What emerged was an "intentional community" of volunteers dedicated to this vision of collaborative creativity that was warmly received in the cultural environment of Charlottesville. The founders and other early members have fond memories of the first few years of Live Arts. "You could say it was founded on beer," recalls the founding artistic director, in reference to the dance parties (later replaced by "coffeehouses" with Dave Mathews one of the first performers) that provided much of the revenue and publicity for the performances. In a 1991 board meeting, she reiterated that Live Arts aspired to be something other than a typical community theatre, a theatre ensemble, "working from within" to achieve high quality while open to new people and community participation.

This early period in Live Arts development was focused on providing a platform for the performers, with an emphasis on "high quality, alternative" productions, "... stuff that people have to think to watch" (averaging around 7 events/productions per year). The "early days," as one founding member recalls did invite "a number of locally written sketches, but providing a platform for such locally written sketches was short-lived." The quality of the works developed for instance during its playwriting workshops, she further noted, weren't deemed strong enough to warrant a staged performance.

In the "little theatre" tradition, the troupe settled into a small space (Michie Building), intersected by two, inconveniently placed columns, in downtown Charlottesville, that served as their home for more than a decade, and where, beginning with Sartre's "No Exit," Live Arts forged its reputation as an avant garde theatre and a valued part of the Charlottesville community.

A play performed in October 1991 provides a good example of a Live Arts production that challenges the audience to think outside conventional boundaries:



*The Ballad of the Sad Café* is a love story, in which the three main characters, Miss Amelia Evans, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy, alternate between the roles of lover and the beloved with one another. As one critic put it, “*The Ballad of the Sad Café* is about an asexual woman over six feet tall, a hunchback dwarf and a lazy criminal, each of whom is unhappily in love with each other...” *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is far from standard theater fare. However the bizarre “gothic” quality of McCullers’ work serves to point out the universal rather than the exceptional by revealing the hidden abnormalities in “normal” life.

Ironically, the limitations of the Michie Building did much to help build the reputation of Live Arts: The productions, put on entirely by volunteers, attracted a loyal audience into an otherwise unremarkable space. Transcending and transforming that space – even having events during construction and renovation – was part and parcel of the creative process and played a central role in the organization’s identity. Speaking to its early desire to straddle several different features namely, of being avant garde, harnessing local talent *and* putting forth quality productions, two founding members state that, “We [as artists] were sick and tired of being censored. We [at Live Arts] wanted to be paid for hard work and a space, a place for our work.” This led to a phase in which we see Live Arts, gradually begin to display characteristics most akin to a rational, business-like form of governance and internal management.

### **Organization/Business Model**

Anyone who has had an opportunity to observe a theatre from behind the scenes knows that even the most modest productions requires extensive preparation, planning and effort. An effective organization is essential for survival, from fundraising and financial management to marketing, box office, technical direction, set building, production, etc., along with artistic direction and rehearsals. Accordingly, behind the scenes, Live Arts adopted the formal organizational trappings essential to a sustainable organization. The founding Executive Director (1990-1995 and Production Director 1995-2000), who with his brother organized and ran the dance parties, became Live Arts’ first paid employee, and, along with other founding members, “...basically held the whole thing together for a long time,” while another founder shepherded Live Arts through 501 (c)(3) incorporation and formed a six-member board in 1991 (Parent, 2005). The Preamble to its bylaws, describes Live Arts as follows:

Live Arts, Inc. accepting the responsibility for promoting community oriented cultural events, providing an affordable performance and rehearsal space to artists, in order to allow said artists to promote and nurture their individual crafts and talents, and to set high standards of quality theatrical presentations, through their resident theatre company, do hereby organize themselves as a non-profit organization . . .

The business model adopted by Live Arts was unique in the universe of community theatres: An avant garde theatre that relied heavily on volunteers, with no paid performers, and eschewed government and foundation grants in favor of a “business” or entrepreneurial model (revenue from fundraising events, corporate sponsorships, and box office receipts).

The challenge that Live Arts posed for itself was how to be rooted in the community, in terms of both financial and human resources, while maintaining its commitment to high quality, nontraditional productions. In other words, Live Arts was formed as neither a government funded arts organization that worked to maintain its autonomy and survive on the basis of government grants, nor as a traditional community theatre that relied on popular box office hits and traditional favorites. Instead, Live Arts is committed to an ongoing effort, and often struggled, to find the right mix of community fundraising and box office receipts, trusting that audiences, volunteers, and donors would collaborate in sustaining this unique creative enterprise.

Yet, like many community nonprofits, Live Arts often found itself in a “crisis driven” mode. The founders, several of whom were also board members, would often jump in to fix problems, and despite a loyal following, the average attendance at productions (based on available records) averaged only 52% of capacity. It was clear that some changes had to occur if Live Arts was to sustain its unique approach to community theatre. A strategic planning effort in 1997 listed the following critical issues:

1. **FUNDRAISING:** Historically, Live Arts has relied on ticket sales for our primary source of income and the unpredictability of such has caused some instability in the operating budget... In order to achieve a more stable financial future for Live Arts, more effort must be put towards fundraising.
2. **FACILITY:** There are limitations to the physical space... that impede programming, and a large percentage of the operating budget is spent on rent. We should seriously examine the feasibility of relocating Live Arts.
3. **BOARD AND STAFF:** Due to the rapid growth of Live Arts as an organization, board and staff structures and communication have been in constant flux. A redefinition of both board and staff organizational structure and roles, clarifying their relationship to each other, is needed.
4. **OUTREACH:** Although attendance at Live Arts productions continues to grow, we recognized that there are still many in the Charlottesville community who are unaware of Live Arts and its mission. Development of a community outreach plan that incorporates marketing strategies is needed.
5. **VOLUNTEERISM:** Although volunteer participation at Live Arts has been fairly consistent, we are aware that the volunteer program is unorganized and some people are both under and over utilized and go unrecognized for their efforts.
6. **PROGRAMMING:** Live Arts has made every effort to provide consistency in its program choices. However, a lack of a defined mission and no formalized process for input on programming has caused there to be some criticism of programming choices. An interactive process for program selection would alleviate this problem, keeping in mind that the artistic director makes the final decisions.

This evaluation alongside a great deal of self-examination led Live Arts down the path of implementing several changes in key organizational attributes.

## **Act Three: Transitions**

### **Board and Staff**

The next phase in Live Arts' development centers on striving to achieve the strategic goals that stem from these critical issues. In 1996, the board of directors hired a full-time artistic director who had worked in various capacities with Live Arts since 1992. In 2000 he added the title of Executive Director, recognizing him as the focal point of both artistic and operational leadership. In this capacity, he embraced and extended the mission of Live Arts, *to forge theatre and community* through face-to-face interaction and engaging challenging issues:

A good theatre artist is speaking to things that the audience finds resonant; good art and good box office. Art and commerce are both interesting when pursuing both... Closing the circle, telling the story, the communal experience is elementally human, part of the ancient ritual, giving it new life and form, always joyful. Community theatre is a cliché. Ours is a worldview based on curiosity and rigor, questioning; not the source of answers, but of questions. We must have high expectations. Great art is not the province of the select few and "ordinary" people are capable of great art (because there are no ordinary people). And ordinary people can appreciate great art and challenging pieces.

The move towards a more corporate, and more centralized model, although viewed with some ambivalence by the founders and long time members, began to achieve much of the desired stability, growth, and direction for the organization. Under this model, Live Arts reached new levels of success and prominence in the community. Attendance, driven in part by more diverse programming, including musicals, climbed to an average of over 70% of capacity of the Michie Building theatre. Clearly, it made a difference to have a full-time director focus on both the artistic and operational aspects of the organization. The founders of Live Arts remained very much involved, but now were not as called upon to solve day-to-day problems. And while some characterized the organization as "a million individual conversations" between the artistic director and the many volunteers and the full-time staff – on and behind the stage – that created each production, Live Arts began making progress towards dealing with each of its strategic issues.

It was also during this time that Live Arts defined its mission as "forging theater and community." Accordingly, most of the founders turned their attention to fundraising in the community in order to achieve financial stability, secure a bigger and better theatre for Live Arts, and a more prominent presence in downtown Charlottesville. The result of these efforts was an exciting new era for Live Arts that also ushered in a new set of challenges and opportunities.

### **Fundraising/Facility**

Two key developments define this period in Live Arts history: 1) the move to a new downtown building with multiple theatres, and rehearsal and office space, designed

specifically for Live Arts, and 2) the restructuring of staff positions and a gradual transition to a more corporate management structure with less reliance on the artistic director for (day-to-day) operational decisions.

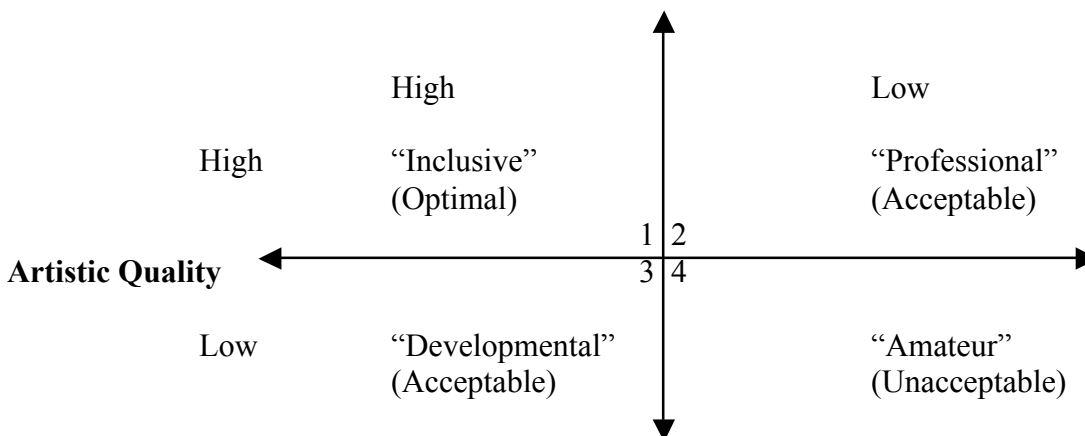
By most any measure, Live Arts can be seen as a successful nonprofit community organization, having grown from its modest beginnings to a prominent place in the community, both physically and in reputation. The new building just off the mall in central Charlottesville was designed with a large down stage and a smaller up stage in order to accommodate more patrons and volunteers while also preserving the intimacy reminiscent of its early days. The results of this development include over 20,000 patrons per year, a volunteer base of over 500, and educational outreach to students and aspiring actors. “Our earnings,” notes a founder member with pride, “from the box-office (ticket sales) is about 25 to 40 percent of our revenues now.” He adds that “it would be downright dangerous not to have a rigorous structure in place. It is this structure that puts pressure upon us to do our best with each show. Space may be more limiting – it, for sure, creates pressures.” Live Arts thus “forges theatre and community” by reaching a large audience with its repertoire of challenging plays and performances, and by involving many volunteers in the production process.

At the same time, success and expansion present Live Arts with the challenge of how to create a sustainable and lively enterprise that remains true to its identity and community-based mission. The larger, more complex facility allows a wider range of activities and community involvement, but also brings unprecedented financial and management pressures. The expense of occupying and maintaining the building requires up to 12 productions per year, making it more difficult to find enough volunteers to staff them all, and risking that talent and experience may be spread more thinly across productions. The need for more revenue to meet physical plant and staffing intensifies the need to achieve the right balance of earned and unearned income as the means for sustaining the organization and autonomy in programming. More professional and/or popular productions can bring in needed revenue, but may do so at the cost of community involvement and volunteerism, and may undercut Live Arts’ identity as a source of thought-provoking, cutting-edge theatre. Maintaining an avant-garde identity and putting forth challenging plays and performances does carry with it the potential to alienate audience and volunteers and as such can undermine the mission of inclusive art. Live Arts continues to challenge this perception and asserts that “great art is not the province of the select few and “ordinary” people are capable of great art (because there are no ordinary people).”

### **Programming**

The following figure suggests the types of productions that can emanate from the combined quest for artistic quality and community/volunteer involvement (forging theatre and community). In pursuit of its mission, Live Arts produces a mix of inclusive (optimal), professional (acceptable), and amateur (acceptable) productions, while managing audience expectations and enthusiasm about the broader mission of Live Arts.

**Figure 1: Community/Volunteer Involvement**



Quadrant 1, inclusive productions, is the working model for Live Arts, a unique but reliable pattern of relying on a core of experienced volunteers, who help to assure the quality of productions without resorting to professionalism, and a larger but less experienced population of volunteers who fulfill critical functions – from stage management to lighting and set building - but have less access to lead roles and directorial opportunities. It is also the least risky approach, often getting the results one would expect from a professional theatre, upholding the artistic quality and cutting-edge tradition of Live Arts, while retaining volunteer involvement as the core of the enterprise. It is above all, a tried and tested routine at Live Arts; a routine that aligns itself well with its founding philosophy of producing quality art while also forging participation from members of the Charlottesville community. For some at Live Arts, this is a natural development consistent with the identity of Live Arts, as expressed by a board member: “Certainly, the community is welcome here. There are repeat volunteers and a turnover of people that constitutes a larger ring... not a small group focused on itself. But still not meant to be “popular,” not trying to maximize seats or appeal to the whole population.” Nevertheless, the inclusive model is based on striving to maximize both volunteer involvement and artistic quality, assuming that the two are not incompatible and can be reinforcing elements over time.

The key to maintaining this inclusive nature of theater production is to continually monitor the quality of productions while also assessing the presence of a vibrant, continually changing group of volunteers who constitute the “larger ring.” This ring of volunteers provides the raw materials that help support the professional core of volunteers. The vibrancy of the model thus depends on maintaining a mix such that the core characteristic of cutting-edge theatre resides within and is supported by an ever larger/diverse mix of newer, less experienced volunteers. The more diverse and changing the nature of members in the outer ring, the greater is the likelihood that Live Arts can forge community through the medium of theater. The potential flaw or drawback with this inclusive model is that the experienced core of volunteers can be relatively stable but must find some means to grow as well. How do you maintain a dynamic core of talented volunteers as the founders fade from the scene? This eventuality must also be considered lest Live Arts finds itself facing a vacuum in leadership.

Occasional deviations from the inclusive model, with more or less community involvement or artistic quality, can be acceptable within the parameters of Live Arts' mission and audience expectations. Plays in quadrant 2, what we identify as "professional" productions, are those that rely heavily on the more experienced volunteers, especially the founding members, with a focus nearly exclusively on the artistic quality of production rather than on community involvement or development of new talent. Its opposite, quadrant 3 or developmental productions, are those productions that emphasize community involvement and development of volunteers, including those in the LATE program, over achieving the normally high level of artistic quality of Live Arts productions. While audiences will normally expect the quality of productions characteristic of quadrants 1 and 2, they can accept the somewhat lower quality of a developmental production as long as it is understood in the context of Live Arts mission to forge theatre and community. In effect, all productions at Live Arts can be characterized as developmental and inclusive. The purpose of this proposed typology is to point out the relative emphasis of each production and how it relates to the organization's mission.

The decisions about what plays to produce, how many, and whether and how to target more diverse audiences, are central to the future of Live Arts. Efforts continue to create a more structured and disciplined management system, with responsibilities and decision making resting not just with the CEO, but delegated according to staff role and responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> The key question is: To what extent does Live Arts conform to familiar forms of community theatre, especially professional or amateur theatre, or does it succeed in creating a collaborative platform for "forging theatre and community?" It is in this context that we examine the experience of being involved with Live Arts and the extent to which the mission of forging theatre and community is a reality for volunteers, staff, board members, and others.

### **The Volunteer Experience**

We conducted in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of 21 volunteers that includes actors, directors, set crews, and board members, many of whom had volunteered for more multiple roles and productions. Some had been involved with Live Arts as founders with many productions to their credit; others had a shorter and/or more intermittent involvement. We asked them the following questions (leaving space for follow up and probing questions):

How and when did you becoming acquainted with Live Arts? What made you interested in volunteering? What roles have you played with Live Arts? What was the first? Describe your first experience with Live Arts. How important is it for you to be involved in Live Arts? How important are you to Live Arts? How do you know? Describe the most important experience you've had with Live Arts. What made it so important? What else can Live Arts do to promote community? How do you encourage participation? How does Live Arts both create and engage the community?

We were especially interested in the extent to which volunteers perceive a "forging of art and community" and whether productions achieved genuine collaborations amongst volunteers of varying talents. Most reported a very positive set of experiences with Live Arts, although we perceived no hesitation to voice critical perspectives. We did not have the opportunity to

interview any volunteers who have terminated their relationship with Live Arts – for whatever reason, so we expect that the overall perspective is more positive than it would be if such experiences were to be included.

For most of these volunteers, Live Arts is not an ancillary part of their lives; it is a source of friendship, an opportunity for community involvement, and platform for artistic expression. For some Live Arts is a “saving grace, a saving place,” a “safe haven,” and “my escape.” One volunteer described her first experience with Live Arts as “a spiritual experience, like having another family. I knew right away I could do more here. The wide range of performers, from novices to the more experienced, means I can be a teacher and a learner.” Likewise, a board member stated, “We love this place. We’re not theatre people but the people here are important to us. We came here without knowing anyone and were embraced by the Live Arts people... I’ve lived in a lot of places and nothing compares to Charlottesville, but Live Arts facilitated my involvement, a network of volunteers.” A volunteer (actor) described Live Arts “like a pressure valve for this wealthy, politically liberal, yet socially conservative town. Can see interesting plays you haven’t heard of in a town this size. It’s a small town and LA [Live Arts] provides something special. C-ville is not all about UVA. There’s a lot of pride in the town and ambition to grow and improve; fertile ground for innovations.” Another volunteer (actor) found that Live Arts provided an opportunity to do high quality work and experienced a sense of “excitement and passion” and that “they needed me as much as I needed them. They were interested in my suggestions and I was not spoken down to. And, I gained a new set of friends.” Or, as another put it, “I love this place and everybody in it! It really is like a family, complete with the crazy aunt, drunk grandpa, and fun cousins; a safe place to explore all my artistic ability.”

A not-so-rosy picture painted by a few volunteers is, however, important to note. One volunteer actor expressed regret that he was screamed at about 30 times by a Director: “Screaming at volunteers is just not done. Just lost his temper and shoved me – it was bad!” He remains an active volunteer to this day and while likely an isolated incident, this frustration is an expression both of the pressure for performance that pushes directors to demand of volunteers more than they are able or willing to give and is moreover, symptomatic of how professional nonprofit theatres must constantly be mindful of what volunteers consider acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Another volunteer explicitly stated that “I’d work with a director if he/she isn’t too sensitive. Should relax with it all.”

It would be wise, as one Live Arts personnel observes, to consider that volunteers fall within two categories:

There are those that come in for training. Now these folks are really open to being directed and told what to do and how to go about doing it. And the other type is the one that already knows it and is really coming to us because it is a hobby. These folks are an asset but they take work. You accept them for what they bring in but these latter ones are the ones that demand work! I deal with them alright – I treat them as an asset and let them go about their job with little micromanaging.

Many volunteers noted that they felt pressured to participate all year long. “The place sure needs more volunteers. Developing a bigger pool of volunteers is a must so that there is no burnout.” Yet another volunteer mentioned that “it is no longer about two shows a year... I hate working over the summer.”

Volunteers whose service stretches back to the days of the Michie Building are well aware of how the organization, and its relationship to the community, has changed. Live Arts, “Went from being this funky, almost underground hidden jewel, a tight group where you knew everybody.” Or as another volunteer put it, “This building... still feels kind of new and foreign to me and not what I associate with Live Arts. The old space was all in one level, small and cramped but easier to keep track of everything. Everyone had a key, an open environment.” In those days, recalls another:

We quite often made something out of nothing. The ingenuity that came from confinement has been challenged by our growth. When we got the new building we felt we had to get bigger and give back to the community, and now have to reinvent our community in keeping with the space; and ongoing process that is much trickier than we imagined.

Some volunteers already feel challenged to transcend this new space and reach out to the community in multiple venues, but also feel constrained by community expectations to use what was built mainly with donated dollars: “Being in the new building has made it more difficult to get out to other venues. We’re concerned that donors might resent going out of the building to do shows so soon after building it.”

As noted above, the new building creates new, and somewhat unexpected demands and strains on the organization. Increased costs and community visibility requires a rigorous programming schedule, making it more difficult, but no less important, to achieve the collaborative ideal in each case. “The critical turning point was moving into this building. Audience expectations are higher... The old space had a sense of permissiveness; the audience would forgive a lot.” And while the volunteer base has expanded to around 500, the reality for each production is that fewer volunteers are available to audition for acting roles or to work on sets, costumes, and lighting. A long time volunteer recalls that in his first show:

There was a crazy level of community involvement, and that has deteriorated. It’s still there but not at the same level because there are more shows spread out in a larger facility. Even now some of the best shows are done on the ‘upstage’ that seats only 65-70. Every show costs you volunteer power as well as dollars... nonprofit, intellectual theatre takes a toll and is hard to sustain.

A more critical perspective on this professional/volunteer model recognizes the trade off between the quest for artistic quality and reliance on volunteers and sees it as somewhat exploitative, as “selling a product with an unpaid and marginalized labor force... The longer you’re here you run up against the chance for the better roles,” because it is “an entertainment based theatre, not community based,” where, “volunteer does not equal community,” and the



result is a, "...volunteer organization that puts out plays that cater to a particular part of the community. Nothing wrong with it as long as you acknowledge it." The risk is creating a perception of elitism, where "...people think of it as less accessible than it is, ...that Live Arts is a bit 'cliquesish', and that some people had a bad experience and didn't feel appreciated." Or as another volunteer put it, "Live Arts has always had open casting, but doesn't always get the word out that that's what's happening."

The inclusive model can sustain the organization and avoid exploiting volunteers by valuing learning and following the philosophy that the talents of the volunteers may indeed inform the nature of the product (plays). This philosophy parallels how *community-based* productions are defined in that they emphasize process as much as product and are based on mutual benefit and a heartfelt exchange between the artists and community participants. In fact, it seems almost impossible to overstate how important it is to continue to cultivate new talent among volunteers and provide them with opportunities for significant roles, and to strive to maximize both community participation and artistic quality. When one looks beyond any single production and towards sustaining Live Arts as an important and visible community organization, it is critical to strive to make everyone better. As one volunteer who recently directed a play for the first time puts it, "In the long run, "The varsity team is only as good as the JV team." A range of skills exists in every production, from the very experienced to first-timers. As another experienced volunteer points out, this diversity of skills and experience:

Creates an incredible opportunity for learning in the context of a 9-week commitment (5 days per week). We haven't always done a good job of spreading knowledge, to pass it on to new people, (which) is key to our sustainability. With growth, the old systems of communication and learning are not working... We need every single person and can't afford to lose anyone, ever. If you aren't having fun and feel isolated, you won't come back.

More popular and professional productions characteristic of most community theatres may bring in needed revenue, but may do so at the cost of community involvement, and volunteerism, and undercut Live Arts' identity as a source of thought-provoking, discussion invoking, cutting-edge theatre:

We don't hit it out of the park every time, and range from great f----g good to can't stand to be in the room with it. We bat better than .500 and that's very good; an extraordinary audience will return after a bad show. If you're only doing "safe" work then there's no profound meaning for anyone; not trying very hard. Audience can see failure in the context of a larger struggle. Programming is a continuum as is the audience, actors, etc. An actor on stage in a play last week was first in a play 15 years ago and the audience has seen him develop. We have the advantages and disadvantages of a name brand. People have expectations and we have the obligation to upend those expectations from time to time.

## Community Outreach

For most of its history, Live Arts has sought a creative and sustainable balance between its origins as an avant-garde theatre that provides a platform for dedicated performers and challenging productions, and its role as a community-based, nonprofit organization that recognizes community outreach as a critical, strategic, and ethical issue. Without deliberate and ongoing efforts to attract a more diverse constituency, Live Arts would likely attract a relatively narrow slice of Charlottesville and surrounding areas – white, educated, and economically secure - to its plays, as audience and volunteers. The decision, taken early in its history, to incorporate Live Arts as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, established a trajectory away from a narrow constituency and towards greater engagement with the community. This has occurred through deliberate programming choices, educational and volunteer outreach, and box office discounts.

There is substantial conversation within Live Arts on how best to bridge this gap between its identity as an avant-garde theatre and the mission to forge community. “The founders,” notes a member of Live Arts’ board, “were cool but need to and can attract a new crowd... the goal is to get to the point where people in the community can think of Live Arts as theirs... the building is interesting, but the outside is imposing, like a fortress.” Under the title “Opening Doors/Tearing Down Walls (Make It Easy),” the executive director reflects on the need to make the lobby more warm and welcoming; tour shows to parks, neighborhoods and community centers; provide options for childcare and transportation; speak more languages beside English; host fundraisers in the residences of supporters and sell a student pass for admission to classes as well balcony tickets; to more fully exploit the “pay what you can”, make free previews available alongside scholarships and balcony seats to address economic barriers to attendance. Some of these have indeed been implemented over the years.

For instance, the “Pay What You Can Night” (Wednesdays), opens the theatre doors to many who might not otherwise be able to afford to attend a play, or, “to encourage more first timers to come.” A survey conducted during the 2005-06 season shows that the majority of those who attended the Pay What You Can Night were not new to Live Arts and also pay full price when able, while a significant minority (32%) were first time patrons. Most paid between five and ten dollars per performance and expressed their appreciation for the opportunity: “It makes it possible for all members of the community to afford Live Arts and is a real community service.” “It is a huge enabler for students and gives us exposure to the arts.” “It is nice that people who can afford a little extra can allow others less fortunate to be able to attend who may not have the resources to do so.”

A more daunting challenge for Live Arts has been how to promote racial and ethnic diversity in Live Arts audience and volunteers, a diversity that is more reflective of the Charlottesville community. Records show that since 2000, out of 89 productions, 33 featured an all African-American or diverse casts, with at least one production per year with an African-American theme, which are well attended by African-Americans. Further, in our interviews and observations of post production meetings, it is clear that African-Americans and other

minorities are welcome at Live Arts and have taken on significant roles at all levels of productions, including as lead actors and directors. A founding member and director remarked that, “We now have a good base of African American players. It has taken us 18-20 years to get the African Americans to become a part of it all. Theater is not a component of their lives. That fact really must be understood. We have tried hard to get here.”

Despite these genuine efforts to reach out to Charlottesville’s African-American community, there remains a gap between these efforts and perceptions of their success. Many of those we interviewed, including African-American volunteers and staff members, perceived that “...it still comes off as largely doing one “black” production each year,” bringing in more African-American audience members, and as one long time volunteer put it, achieving “integration by segregation.” We found considerable consensus among the interviewees that while Live Arts has a passionate and loyal audience, it still struggles to reflect the diversity of the Charlottesville community, tending to be older, and more white and wealthy. “Ethnically, Live Arts is all sort of one note. There’s the one ‘black’ production each year. If they were a little clearer about their desire for a more diverse group, they would get it.”

Another volunteer added that while Live Arts is dedicated to the community, it depends ... on what community you’re talking about. Live Arts does a lot for the middle class and on up, but not much with the lives of the working class... There’s not a whole lot of outreach to the African-American community either; I’ve hardly seen any other African-Americans in the audience. Because prices are quite reasonable, I think it has to do with the perception that ‘It’s not for us,’ and the plays are not oriented towards African Americans.”

The results, while slow and unsatisfactory to some, are indeed emerging. While many are skeptical, some do acknowledge that the efforts have borne fruit and that the problem perhaps lies not so much in the diversity entailed in each production or event and outreach effort but in the number of such productions and the challenge therefore of reaching optimal results with each. A board member notes:

Live Arts, I believe, has successfully broadened its role in the community. There are several minorities in the High School Musical (staged July 11-August 2, 2008). The choreographer is a minority, principal is a minority, and many of the students are minorities. We are perhaps operating beyond capacity. It is important to examine how much we can do and do well.

## **Conclusion**

The story of Live Arts is being acted out, in one form or another, in similar communities across the nation. The dual mission of forging theatre and community through meaningful face-to-face interaction is by no means an easy task, but is more than worthwhile as a counterweight to the technologically driven individuation that pervades contemporary society. Therefore, deliberate efforts must be made and resources allocated to achieve both ends. At Live Arts, measures designed to safeguard the core group of adherents (actors, audience and

members) while continually expanding the periphery of volunteers to include ever more participants are essential to survival and success. Such expansion through deliberate means is particularly important at a time when Live Arts and numerous other nonprofit organizations experience declines in revenues, leadership transitions, and acute shortages of volunteers in tough economic times (*PA Times*, 2009). Broadened and deepened community participation in meaningful and challenging performances, facilitated by a professional management team, remains the key to survival of a theatre that helps to create and sustain the “face-to-face” foundation of a vibrant community.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Since we completed the study, Live Arts has split organizational leadership between artistic and operational directors (following the departure of the CEO).

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